

FOREWORD

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Oral History Interview

with

ELIE ABEL

March 18, 1970
New York, New York

By Dennis J. O'Brien

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'BRIEN: Oh, I think that would be a good place to begin as
a--perhaps with your first meeting with JFK.

ABEL: All right. I first got to know Jack Kennedy as a
senator before the 1960 election; in fact, it was in
1959. I had just returned to Washington from a period
of service in India and South Asia as a correspondent for the New York
Times, and to my surprise one day a mutual friend said, "Jack Kennedy
wants to meet you. Could you make lunch one day?" So I did.

It was one of those mutual discovery occasions. I was curious as
to why he had summoned me. It turned out that about the time I was in
India, writing for the Times about India's problems, he had begun, as
a senator, to get very interested in India's problems. As you've heard
from many others, he was an avid newspaper reader and he remembered
where every correspondent had been and whom he knew and so forth.

Essentially this was a kind of personal debriefing on the situation
as I saw it emerging in India: What was likely to happen after
[Jawaharlal] Nehru? What were the forces within the [All-India National]
Congress party and within the country? I did much of the talking. He
listened and asked very sharp, perceptive questions. I had a feeling--
I never documented it later--that he had not been vitally interested in

ran a very small bureau. There were only two or three reporters in it, and we couldn't be covering everything at the same time. I got involved in some of the post mortems on the Bay of Pigs, but by that time there was no secret. On the missile crisis I was one of perhaps a half dozen around the State Department who smelled that something was up but I didn't have enough information to come out with a story, a hard and fast story so that--well, I did by I guess noon on the twenty-second know that we were going to announce a blockade, but I also knew that the president was going on the air to announce it right after the [Chester R.] Huntley-[David] Brinkley show at 7:00 So I went on Huntley-Brinkley live that night from the White House with Sander Vanocur. Each of us did a piece kind of hinting that something of this kind was in the works, but, if you will, on that occasion responding to a caution that we ought not to steal the president's thunder. I don't think anybody could that night.

O'BRIEN: All right. Well, we'll switch to the State Department for a moment. When do you first meet [Dean] Rusk, encounter Rusk?

ABEL: I guess I first met Rusk at Palm Beach. Well, wait a minute. I had known him slightly years before in the [Harry S.] Truman administration at the UN when he was assistant secretary of state, deputy under secretary or something of that kind. I knew him slightly then. Then I was in Palm Beach with a group of reporters covering the pre-inaugural period, when the Cabinet was being chosen. At a certain point Rusk showed up and held a press conference. That was the first time that I'd talked to him in many years. I knew other people in the State Department of the new administration rather better at the beginning. I'd known George Ball for a good many years and Chester Bowles and Averell Harriman. So Rusk was, in a sense, the new element in the equation for me.

O'BRIEN: But I understand at one time you were at least under consideration for the public affairs job, wasn't it?

ABEL: Yes, yes. I can tell you that story. It's more complicated I think than Salinger made it appear in his book. I was first approached, not by the president, but by [Robert S.] Bob McNamara whom I had never met, or I was pretty sure I'd never met him. He swears to this day that he knew me in Detroit when he was comptroller of the Ford Motor Company or assistant comptroller and I was the regional correspondent of the New York Times. This goes back to 1950. I don't remember it, but he was at that time in a rather junior position, just beginning to make his way up in the company.

What happened apparently was that after I broke the story that he was under consideration for the Defense job, which was a story of appreciable interest in Detroit, as you might imagine, because he'd

president cared about it. In the end, I gathered--Lloyd can tell you more about this--Rogers's advice was, in fact, to "tell the FBI to go to hell." He did and they dropped it. They demanded sources, you know. How did he get a certain document, that kind of thing.

O'BRIEN: Did you find Secretary Rusk's Friday afternoon back--so-called backgrounders . . .

ABEL: Deep background. That was his term, deep background.

O'BRIEN: Were they deep?

ABEL: No. Somebody said to me the other day, "The odd thing about Dean Rusk is that he says the same thing in exactly the same way whether he's speaking in public or in private." But there were moments in which Rusk--we're now speaking of the Kennedy period--was to a degree helpful, and the missile crisis was one of them. He--at a number of crucial points in the missile crisis--had very often, not on a Friday afternoon, but on say, a Saturday morning, a group of us in and kind of gave us the line. A crucial point I remember was the Sunday when the crisis was defused, to everyone's enormous relief and the surprise of many.

I mention this in the book. He appealed to us, "When you're writing about this, don't make this appear to be a great capitulation on the part of the Russians. You must recognize that Mr. Khrushchev is a man of politics. He lived long enough to be criticized and opposed within the Russian leadership for having put the missiles there in the first place. He will now probably be damned by many for pulling them out under pressure. We have no wish to make this situation more difficult than it is already by crowing." That kind of thing. Most often, however, what you got from him was a point of view and occasional insight, very few facts. The facts were relayed at a lower level.

O'BRIEN: Well, in your relationship with Rusk in those years, in a sense, did you ever feel that you really got underneath the surface and got beyond the thing that you . . .

ABEL: Well, the one time I saw him lose control of himself--and he admitted it subsequently; he can get very angry--was in the (Lyndon B.) Johnson era on the rather celebrated occasion shortly after the Tet offensive when he had one of these Friday afternoon things and was giving us the official line on the Tet offensive on the whole being no worse than a bad cold and maybe it was a victory for our side. You know, by this time [Eugene J.] McCarthy was running and the Democratic party was falling apart, and nobody believed him. We started pressing Rusk a little bit to at least admit that there might have been an intelligence failure on the part of our military leadership in Vietnam, a total failure to grasp that Tet was . . . [Interruption].

Second Oral History Interview

with

ELIE ABEL

April 10, 1970
New York, New York

By Dennis J. O'Brien

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'BRIEN: Well, I thought we might today take up some questions concerning the missile crisis, the writing of your book. One question that comes out of the book for me, as well as some of the other interviews I've done on the Cuban missile crisis, is the role of [Dean] Rusk in this whole thing. You know, he's been criticized for not taking, you know, a kind of executive leadership at that time. Is it possible, or did you have the feeling in your putting the book together that perhaps the State Department people on that committee [Executive Committee of the National Security Council] had gotten together prior or early in that week once the missiles were first discovered, and arrived at a kind of working agreement with each other at all?

ABEL: No. I doubt that very much because Rusk repeated the performance during several key decisions having to do with the escalation of the war in Vietnam and later with stopping the bombing. I talked to him about this fairly recently, in December (1969), I think, and I was mindful of the problem I had with him on the missile crisis. He was, I think, the last person I talked to when I was wrapping up the research on that book because he kept postponing it. Finally I got to him and said, "Look, I've got to see you. I'm going off to London. The book has to be delivered. I really can't finish this book without your testimony." By this time, I had gone through George Ball, everybody else involved, and no Rusk.

Finally he did agree to see me and we sat down and went through a most bizarre session in which I kept asking specific questions about what he had said, or felt or recommended or done at a given point. And he'd say, "I can't talk about that." I'd say, "But look, the president

is dead. The missile crisis is behind us. Everybody considers it a kind of triumph for good sense. Why are you now so reluctant?" He just wouldn't play. He kept saying, "When I leave this building, I'm going to walk out of here, taking nothing with me but my hat and my date book. I'm not taking any documents with me. I have no interest in writing books. I was the president's personal adviser. I told him certain things that maybe I didn't tell other people."

Well, in the end I suppose I bullied him into producing a document by saying: "Now look, I've talked to everybody else who had any part in this thing: people in the White House, the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency], the Pentagon, and foreign governments. You're the only one who's playing hard to get. Now, I said, "I have the impression from what other people told me that you had no point of view, that you were opaque and fuzzy and so forth." That got him angry which turned out to be the right tactic because, in the end, he said, "Oh, I made a recommendation all right, but it's between me and the president." Well, I goaded him sufficiently so that at one point he said well, he would see and I was to come back the following day.

Then he produced the paper that was in his files. It was a written recommendation to President Kennedy to go for a blockade instead of an air strike or an invasion. It pretty much summed up the discussion within the executive committee, but he signed his name to it. This was Dean Rusk to the president. Well, it's an odd way to behave.

I had a subsequent flashback of this Russian attitude when I started working on a book that's now in the works which has to do with Vietnam. We talked, among others--by this time George Ball was out of the picture--with [Nicholas de B.] Nick Katzenbach and General [Earle G.] Wheeler and General [William C.] Westmoreland and lots of people, and ran into the same kind of thing. Nobody knew precisely what Dean Rusk's position was, for example, on whether we ought to go for a bombing halt in March, 1968. Subsequently, the president, President [Lyndon B.] Johnson, said that Dean Rusk had, in fact, proposed it on the fourth of March. Rusk had told me the same thing himself, but not while he was in office, only after he left.

When I said to him, "How is it that your own staff in the State Department didn't know that you had initiated this?" He said, "That was by design. That's the way I operate. From the time I first became Secretary of State," he said, and I'm paraphrasing now; I don't have the actual quote here, "I made it my policy that no blue sky should ever show between me and the president." Now what he meant by that, he subsequently made clear, was that he would make recommendations directly to the president. If the president acted on them, he would, of course, go back and say, "The president wants us to do thus and such." If, on the other hand, the president ever turned down a recommendation of his, he didn't want people to know that he'd made the recommendation because this would seem to suggest that there was friction between him and the president.

ABEL: You see, he had a very peculiar definition again of what was the proper relationship between him and the president. It was the same with both presidents he served. It caused a certain amount of bafflement naturally on his staff.

O'BRIEN: Right. Then there was no, in any way that you can see in the missile crisis, attempt to operate. . . . [Interruption]

ABEL: No. I don't think there was any prearrangement. You might check this kind of thing with George Ball, but it doesn't sound like Rusk's way. . . . He was never completely frank with his own people. Katzenbach will tell you that. Nick, moreover I think, felt that there were times when Rusk somewhat overestimated his own influence on the president, but this was more in the Johnson era than the Kennedy era.

O'BRIEN: Well, putting the book together, did you find any strong anti-Robert Kennedy feeling among people in ExComm that you perhaps couldn't put in the book because of . . .

ABEL: Yes. There was some, from Adlai Stevenson for one. But I did put it in the book. Adlai felt it quite strongly; he spoke of Bobby's "bull-in-the-china-shop" attitude.

[Dean G.] Acheson was very scornful of this young man who had no credentials as a diplomat who was presuming to advise his brother. Not [John A.] McCone because McCone--Bobby was supposed to be sort of McCone's friend in the Kennedy establishment; not [Robert S.] Bob McNamara, of course because he was personally very close to Bobby. The Russian ambassador also had a warm, close relationship with Bobby. David Ormsby-Gore likewise. No, I think the main hostility encountered was from two men who otherwise didn't agree on anything, Acheson and Adlai Stevenson.

O'BRIEN: Well, in regard . . .

ABEL: Both viewed him as a kind of interloper, a callow youth . . .

O'BRIEN: On the other hand, some of the people around Robert Kennedy have often said that Dean Rusk and McGeorge Bundy lost their minds during this thing. Did you see any evidence of this?

ABEL: I think losing their minds is . . .

O'BRIEN: Well, that's the phrase.

ABEL: Yes. It's an overstatement. I think Mac Bundy did switch positions a couple of times, and this raised a certain amount of scorn in a particular circle. I don't have the feeling, though, that the people who were around Bobby Kennedy knew very much about what was happening at the time.

I think after Jack's death a kind of mythology began to arise, to build, but I never had the feeling that the people who were very close to Bobby were of any great consequence at the time of the missile crisis, except for Nick Katzenbach, who was himself involved as Deputy Attorney General and who, for example, helped draft the blockade declaration, that kind of thing. I never heard Nick talk that way. No, I didn't encounter that kind of thing particularly. I think you do find it subsequently, after Jack was dead, because Bobby began to acquire some new followers who were not even in Washington at the time. You know, a mythology began to be constructed. People like Jack Newfield and Adam Walinsky and Peter Edelman and so forth; they were not around at the time of the missile crisis.

O'BRIEN: Sure. Did you detect anything in writing the book that might have pointed towards an attempt on the part of the White House, particularly the president and the attorney general, to guide this thing in the direction of a diplomatic, or at least away from, you know, an air strike solution?

ABEL: Yes. I think, however, that the president was being enormously careful not to appear weak or irresolute. This was a direct consequence, I think, of the Bay of Pigs disaster which weighed heavily on his mind for the rest of his life. I think it was a factor when this situation boiled up. Don Wilson will tell you, and others who were close to Bobby and to Jack, that the hallmark of the president's attitude was, "There will be no more disasters. I've got to be very careful about what I do; I have to appear very strong and very determined."

This did not, in his view, necessarily mean going to an invasion or an air strike. He was very careful in dealing with the professional military who, on the whole, were much more willing to go into military action. He asked them some very tough questions repeatedly. He called in the head of the tactical air force--his name is in the book, I don't now remember it--twice that I know of, and said to him, "Now you keep pleading for an air strike. If we let you have one, can you guarantee that you would not kill too many Cubans and that you would, in fact, eliminate all the missiles?" Well, that's kind of stacking the cards. As a guy who was in the air force myself at one time, I know that no air strike is a surgical operation. But the President was acting very shrewdly, turning their own language back on them. They were the ones who talked about a clean, surgical air strike. And he kept saying, "All right. How clean will it be? How many people will you kill?" Of course, when pressed, they couldn't honestly assure him on either point.

I think Bobby sensed very early that there was nothing more reckless or more stupid than just going into direct military action. My own feeling is that George Ball influenced him in arriving at this conclusion more than anyone else.. I don't know whom else he could've talked to. I

I suspect that Ball was the first to speak out against precipitate military action.

Bobby personalized it and said, you know, "My brother will not be the Tojo of the Sixties and so forth." That came fairly early. Now, this may have been because in his private conversations with his brother he had developed perhaps a keener awareness than those outside the circle, outside the family circle in this case, of his brother's own predilections not to go to unnecessary violence. But certainly Bobby was the one who, in the presence of the hawks so to speak, with the help of McNamara and eventually even of [C. Douglas] Dillon, swung the argument away from direct military action. . . .

O'BRIEN: Right. Well, in your interviewing of--and you did, let me see, you touched almost every participant.

ABEL: Yes. Right.

O'BRIEN: Well, in doing your interviewing here and all, were you able to get a fairly clear picture of who was playing the role of devil's advocate, who in a sense was arguing very seriously on policy positions? In other words, Stevenson's role is another one that's been. . . .

ABEL: Stevenson's role is, I think, somewhat misunderstood and sadly misrepresented. I tried to clarify that. I don't know whether I succeeded. To begin with, Stevenson lived in a different world; this has to be faced. Stevenson was the man who, whatever the decision, was going to have to stand up in the United Nations Security Council and plead the case for the United States. He therefore had a perfectly natural build-in requirement--and I think if Arthur Goldberg had been the ambassador at that time he would have taken the same position. He wanted a case that would be defensible.

Remember, Stevenson was burned very badly in the Bay of Pigs when he stood up there and denied that any American airplanes were involved. So he wanted to be godamned sure. He also, as a man of appreciable experience in international affairs, could foresee that maybe those old missiles in Turkey would at some point become part of this bargain. He wanted the president to consider such possibilities at a time when others were unwilling even to discuss the idea because it seemed to them to smack of surrendering some vital position with a gun at your head. There was some posturing of this kind. As for Stevenson--I haven't always agreed with Adlai about everything, but it seems to me his role here was really quite an honorable one, and maybe even a brave one.

I talked to him a good bit after it was over and just before his death. He was sad. He confessed, for example, that his initial reaction when Kennedy, Jack Kennedy, first told him about the missiles was anxiety,

fear that this young man was going to do something foolish. He was upset by Bobby's behavior in the first day or two. In the end, he said to me, I think in New York or perhaps in London during the spring or summer of '65, that Bobby had turned out pretty well, that Bobby had seen the moral issue clearly, had seen the importance of unveiling this crisis when they did so that the U.S. would be in the strongest possible moral position. And, kind of grudgingly, he said that Bobby had surprised him agreeably. He hadn't expected Bobby to be quite so sophisticated as that.

O'BRIEN: How did Stevenson read the sending of [John J.] McCloy as well as the [Stewart J. O.] Alsop and [Charles L.] Bartlett article?

ABEL: Well, the Alsop-Bartlett article obviously hurt him very deeply.

O'BRIEN: How did he read it though? Did he see . . .

ABEL: I think he saw it, mistakenly, I believe--as a plot by Mac Bundy and/or Bobby Kennedy or both to hang him personally. Of course, part of his problem was that Bartlett had at the time no large reputation as an investigative reporter. I don't mean to downrate Charlie. I think he does some pretty important things at times, but you know, his reputation leaped upward at the time when his friend Jack Kennedy became president. So the assumption inevitably was made that he was getting it straight from the horse's mouth. As, I suppose, he was.

O'BRIEN: Did he get it from the horse's mouth or from people like Bundy or even like . . .

ABEL: I don't know to this day. I never really pursued that. I've made it a personal policy not to inquire too closely into where other people get their stories. I was busy getting my own. But Stevenson was hurt by it, very badly hurt. My guess is that at some point he threatened to resign because the White House very promptly issued a statement which was clearly designed to soothe his hurt feelings.

O'BRIEN: Of all the people in ExComm that you interviewed, who did you find was most helpful in providing a kind of recollection of the crisis in its entirety and the events that took place?

ABEL: I would say George Ball, Llewellyn Thompson, and Bob McNamara.

O'BRIEN: How about [Roswell L.] Gilpatric?

ABEL: Gilpatrick was helpful, extremely so. He added a certain number of details. So yes, on the military side, on the Pentagon side, Gilpatrick as well.

In a way the most helpful of all, but not by way of being an original source, was Paul Nitze and for a special reason. Paul Nitze is a compulsive note taker. He's one of the few people who cannot sit through a meeting without jotting down names, who said what. He has his own skeletonized form of note taking. And when I started researching this book I had such a terrible time trying to resolve conflicts of recollection, that I was looking for somebody who might have kept a record. (This was before Bobby made his notes available to me.) And somebody--I can't remember--some friend of mine said, "Have you talked to Paul? He sits at every meeting and makes notes on yellow pads, and I'll bet he still has those notes." Well, it turned out he did. I couldn't have read them myself, but we sat down together. Paul was then secretary of the Navy. We sat down in his office, and for a whole afternoon waded through these notes. He was quite willing to help. So from that point of view, as I say, it helped greatly to corroborate bits of testimony from other people. There wasn't a great deal that was original in it but at least certain elements of confusion about who was in a room at what moment, who said what in response to something else--he had the most complete record then available to me.

O'BRIEN: In putting this book together, was there anything in regard to the intelligence sources on the crisis that you could not put in there? In other words, of how the pictures were gotten, perhaps some technical aspects?

ABEL: Well, the pictures make an interesting story in themselves, which I touch on in the book; but there's no reason not to go into more detail about it now. It took me something like four months to persuade the CIA to talk to me at all about the missile crisis. When they did, I was not surprised to discover that it was McCone himself who wanted to talk to me; he would not leave it to a subordinate. I submitted at his request a series of written questions. Then I was invited out to Langley. We sat down; he handed me some written answers which weren't very communicative. I pressed him some more and started asking him some of the kinds of questions you're asking me at this point in an effort to fill certain gaps in the narrative.

One of the things that I was troubled by was why had that U-2 plane been sent to that particular location on a particular day, the fourteenth of October. I knew the general background. I knew about the SAM [Surface-to-Air Missiles] missiles having been installed in various places. I asked McCone: "If the whole of western Cuba had not been overflown for the better part of a month, why San Cristóbal on the fourteenth?" And he kept saying he didn't know; he couldn't remember. Then at one point,

out of the blue, he said, "Oh, some fellow at the Pentagon had an idea." And I said, "What fellow?" He said he didn't know.

Well, I went back to the Pentagon, I think, in the first instance to (Arthur) Sylvester, and then eventually had a meal with McNamara, and appealed to them to find out. They, in the beginning, said they didn't know but they would go on searching; they simply weren't aware of anybody in the Defense Intelligence Agency. Then, weeks or months later, I received in the mail one day a copy of a citation, showing the Legion of Merit had been awarded to a Colonel J. R. Wright. The citation, which I print in the book, says specifically what it was for. He was the guy who had the hunch that maybe San Cristóbal because of the quadrilateral placement of the SAM missiles was a place to have another look at. By this time Colonel Wright had retired. Somehow it seems fated that the man responsible for this stroke of genius or of surmise should have retired with the Legion of Merit but no promotion. There was some difficulty about finding him, and I was on my way to England. But I had the citation so I was able to give him full credit.

Perhaps a year after the book was published, I was still living in England-and one day received a letter from a Colonel J. R. Wright with a big, thick enclosure. Colonel Wright, living in Coronado, California, had been looking through the paperback bookshelf in his corner drug store when he saw this book; he leafed through it, and he saw his name in the index. He didn't know why his name was in the index, so he looked it up. And he discovered that I was the only person who had ever given him any public credit. Now I don't to this day understand why the Pentagon bootlegged this Legion of Merit thing, because it's perfectly obvious that the citation was not announced to the press at the time it was made; maybe they were trying to protect some secret. At any rate he then, unsolicited, sent me his Cuban missile crisis diary which runs to some eighty pages. I have it in my papers and I'll put it eventually in the Kennedy Library.

O'BRIEN: Great. That's good. There wasn't any indication that the satellite reconnaissance would play a part in this?

ABEL: No. No. In fact, it all seemed to me to be through very old fashioned reconnaissance. The first intimations about rockets coming in and that kind of thing were all from live human witnesses, at least one of whom had to get out of Cuba to communicate his story because there was apparently no clandestine transmission service available. That was one reason for a delay in getting the first reports back.

O'BRIEN: In terms of the Russians that play a part in this, well, [Andrei A.] Gromyko, [Anatoly F.] Dobrynin. . . .

ABEL: Yes. [Alexander S.] Fomin.

O'BRIEN: . . . and Fomin as well. Any indication that, let's say, Gromyko had, or did not have prior knowledge of this? Dobrynin?

ABEL: Well, I find it hard to believe that Gromyko did not have. I find it at least conceivable that Dobrynin did not. Bobby, till his dying day, believed that Dobrynin was telling the truth as he knew it when he denied that there were any missiles there--and Dobrynin, incidentally, used very precise language--missiles which were capable of reaching or threatening the United States. Now maybe Bobby was being a little naive about that. On the other hand, . . . I have been in situations involving other Soviet diplomats in which I have had the feeling that certain people are told no more than they absolutely need to know in order to make a convincing case. Gromyko is another story, because Gromyko was the Soviets' number one foreign policy technician and had been for so many years that to me it was inconceivable that he should not have known what kinds of equipment were going to Cuba.

O'BRIEN: You know, you mentioned a rumor in the back of the book or in the last of the book that talks about the attempt on the part of the Russians to get an airplane to Brazil to get the body of the dead ambassador back. Did you follow that rumor out to any extent?

ABEL: You know, I've forgotten about it. I'm sure it's in the book.

O'BRIEN: All I was going to say is that it's my understanding there was some intelligence reports about that that came in. They were pretty sensitive sorts of things that were circulated around.

ABEL: You know, I don't remember that at all. I remember that an ambassador had drowned, I think, or something of that kind, and a plane was sent. But I've forgotten the time element. I don't remember how it fits. Maybe I can find it in the book.

O'BRIEN: Well, that's okay.

ABEL: I've got one copy here. But I don't. . . . Wasn't that somehow confused with Gromyko's departure from the United States?

O'BRIEN: Yes.

ABEL: Let me have a quick look here. 118, maybe that's the reference.

O'BRIEN: The thing that I was going to relate to that is Fomin. Did you track Fomin's movements down before the meeting with [John A. Scali? Was he here in the United States during all that time?

ABEL: I don't know. He and Scali, of course, had known one another for some considerable time.

O'BRIEN: Right. But he had just recently come back in, hadn't he?

ABEL: Fomin Well, that I don't know, but Fomin had been in the embassy for some time and was listed in the diplomatic list. I didn't happen to know him. A good many other people did. As you may know, the way the Russians tend to operate in this field they kind of parcel out various contacts with informative and influential Americans among members of their embassy staff. Each member of the embassy staff tries to have lunch or dinner at intervals with certain Americans. Now Scali happened to be on Fomin's list from way back. They had met a number of times earlier. Come to think of it that's the only way this could have worked. You see, if Fomin had called me, whom he didn't know, out of the blues, and said, "I've got to talk to you right away," I would immediately have been suspicious and probably would have told him I just couldn't make it.

There was a little man I used to see, in fact there were two. There was one guy who was quasi-press and another one who was supposedly a disarmament expert and he loved to talk with me at lunch about arms control and that kind of thing. But I guess my little friend was not involved because I didn't hear from him throughout that whole period. You should check this with Scali himself--but I understand that when Fomin first started seeing Scali, perhaps a year and a half before this episode, Scali checked him out with some of our intelligence people. And they said they thought that he was a pretty big fish in the Russian intelligence apparatus. So Scali was alerted. You know, Scali had the impression that this guy was not just a minister or counsellor in the embassy. He had, I believe, received some intimation, whether from the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] or the CIA, that Fomin was quite an important man. I think that knowledge played its part in this. If he hadn't believed that he might not have jumped when Fomin called on him that way.

O'BRIEN: Right. Was there anything in the conversations between Fomin and Scali that you knew of that didn't get in the book?

ABEL: No, not that I know of. Scali gave me copies of his own memoranda to Rusk and [Roger, Jr.] Hilsman. Now he may have had something to add. I doubt it though as the memoranda showed evidence of having been written in great haste and, you know, just banged out on a typewriter on copy paper.

O'BRIEN: Well, that brings up an interesting point on this business of security and a person like yourself, a person like Scali who works with an agency like the State Department. Now are you people put through a security clearance?

ABEL: No, not to my knowledge. I have no doubt the State Department has a file somewhere--I've never seen it. They must have impressions about us written down somewhere.

O'BRIEN: Well, do various intelligence agencies like the FBI domesticall or the CIA ever come to you, or did they come to you those year to solicit any information about direct contacts?

ABEL: Not in Washington. On some overseas assignments, yes. But most often it was done through the ambassador. For example, I was involved as a reporter in covering certain of the events in Eastern Europe that led up to the Hungarian Revolution. There it was not a case really of the embassy people coming to me and saying, "Tell us what you know," or, "What was the substance of your conversation with Mr. So-and-So?" It was simply that they had information that we wanted and, we, on the other hand, got around the country more than they did. There was, in short, a mutuality of interest. In a place like Budapest or Warsaw or even Belgrade in those days it was not unnatural that perhaps once a week you would sit down with the ambassador and chew things over, not in the formal sense of being debriefed or anything like that. You know, comparing notes. "Have you seen so-and-so lately? What's your impression?"

There were some cases in which it wasn't so much military intelligence that they were looking for as diplomatic intelligence of a very special kind. For example, I was once in Rumania at a time when we had very strained almost nonexistent relations with Rumania. [Robert E.] Bob Thayer was our minister at the time, but it was a period in which he had almost no contact with the Rumanian government. Well, I came in--I was the first American journalist who had been allowed to visit Rumania in something like six years--and I was invited to meet the prime minister and had an interview with him. Our minister had not seen the prime minister except from a distance at May Day in many month. So the embassy was very interested, naturally, in what the prime minister had told me. Now they could have waited until next day's New York Times arrived, five or six days late, but they asked me and I saw no harm in giving them an intimation beforehand of what was going to be in tomorrow's Times, no more and less.

In Washington, I have at various times met with CIA officials. The most common format is that someone like McCone or Dick Helms might have lunch or dinner with a group of journalists, generally when he had something to sell. I remember Allen Dulles doing this once at a time when he was trying to disabuse us of the notion that there was a missile gap. This was before the 1960 election. He didn't succeed, I'm afraid, because he was talking in such elliptical terms that very few of us understood what he was trying to tell us. He got into this complicated business about intentions and capabilities and so forth. But that generally was done through this kind of diplomatic correspondents' and columnists' grapevine. There was always one colleague who knew the head of the CIA rather better than the rest of us and he would call up and say, you know, "Can you come and have lunch tomorrow?" generally in a club, sometimes in a restaurant.

Dick Helms is, on the whole, more approachable than the others, I think. He used to be a newspaperman himself. In his case, I've had lunch with him at the Occidental Restaurant. . . . It's oddly the same restaurant in which Scali and Fomin met. Dick liked to eat there and generally sat in a corner table in the main dining room. There he got away from CIA for an hour, met with friends at lunch and went back again.

O'BRIEN: Is it. . . . Oh, let's say, when you need information, you need background information, can you obtain it from the intelligence agencies?

ABEL: Not very easily. They have a very funny system. In theory they don't have an information officer. In fact they do have a designated press contact (at the time of the missile crisis I believe it was Stanley Grogan, a retired army colonel). You can call him at the office or at home and he will take your query and sometimes he'll call back. Other times he won't. Most often, you don't get an answer. There are times when he will say, "Well, we have nothing on that," or "We can't give you anything on that." On the other hand there have been occasions when they did come up with answers. But I found on the whole, that it was easier to deal with the State Department intelligence and research people and only in rare cases to go to the CIA directly. Because whether it was Hilsman or (Thomas L.) Tom Hughes who succeeded him--I don't know who has the job now--these guys sat with the CIA every day in the intelligence community meetings. They had access to the same information. They were, I think, a little more savvy about the diplomatic aspects and also the public relations aspects.

O'BRIEN: Well getting back to the missile crisis for a few short things. In the interviews with the people in Defense or State, did you ever find an alternative plan, let's say, a fallback position to the air strike position?

ABEL: Well, the only one that I found was an invasion of Cuba if the air strike didn't work. Those two were interlocked. . . I think I list all the alternatives in the book. There were six at one point, some of which were a little naive I thought, but, you know, they were boxing the compass in the early stages.

O'BRIEN: Was there any fallback position to a stiff [Nikita S.] Khrushchev reply?

ABEL: Yes, an air strike Tuesday morning.

O'BRIEN: And that was it. There was no alternative to that one?

ABEL: Apparently not. Now, it had not been ordered. The planes were in position. The crews had been briefed and so forth but it still would have required an affirmative order by the president. In fact on the Saturday night, October 28, I think the--the 27th or 28th--when Bobby went to Dobrynin to deliver the reply to the famous secret letter, he was authorized to tell Dobrynin, and he did, that unless the answer

was affirmative we would have to take direct military action early in the week. I think that's the way he put it. Or so he told me himself.

O'BRIEN: Hilsman's a rather interesting figure through, well, not only in the missile crisis, but throughout his tenure in the State Department. He tends to rub people the wrong way.

ABEL: Yes. Yes.

O'BRIEN: Why is that?

ABEL: Well, he's a little cocky. He's perhaps a little quick to leap to conclusions and I think maybe he was not in the tradition of the quiet man who runs the intelligence operation. He was making speeches; he had very close relationships with a number of people in the press, which few if any of his predecessors to my knowledge had ever had. I think people like MacBundy had a kind of distaste for Hilsman which they could scarcely conceal.

O'BRIEN: Well, Hilsman has some difficulty in those years with Rusk and, as I understand, the vice president as well.

ABEL: Yes.

O'BRIEN: Did you get any insight into this?

ABEL: I don't know about the vice president except that Roger had a lot to do with knocking off [Ngo Dinh] Diem. I think there were some, including the vice president, who felt that this was a misguided policy and that Hilsman had pushed much too hard in that direction. Of course, there are many people who feel that we couldn't have been any worse off--we might have been a little better off--if Diem were left alive. But Roger has a way, as you said, of rubbing people the wrong way. However, I've never found a journalist who on the whole didn't have a reasonable working relationship with Roger, and this in itself made him a rare animal in the State Department. He was always willing to talk.

O'BRIEN: Is that, perhaps, one of the reasons that he . . .

ABEL: I think so. Yes. I think there was a feeling among certain other officials that he was trying to promote himself. Remember he got to be assistant secretary of the Far East after that. He had a lot of enemies in the CIA, I think, too. Interestingly [William P.] Bill Bundy replaced him as Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs and Bill Bundy of course--came straight out of the CIA.

O'BRIEN: Well, let's take some other rubs there as well. How about Bundy and Rusk?

Adlai came over. A gaggle of senators including [J. William] Fulbright and [Leverett] Saltonstall and others.

We all wound up staying in the same, kind of VIP, hostel called the SovietsKaya which is not a normal commercial hotel. The American "delegatsia" were all together. It's kind of amusing seeing Moscow through their eyes, going to the peasant market with Bill Fulbright. You know all those years he's been expertising about Russia and here he was bargaining for a melon with a peasant from Tashkent.

Adlai and I happened to have adjoining bedrooms and we talked a good bit, several evenings we sat and drank together. It's a funny sort of feeling to sit with Adlai Stevenson in Moscow. I mentioned in the book that Khrushchev gave him a hard time when he got there over his performance in the missile crisis. He told me that himself. So everybody who was anybody, as I say-- our friend who later headed the arms control, [William C.] Bill Foster, was there.

It was an odd moment because there is a kind of Russian disarmament establishment as well. There are a certain number of familiar faces whom you used to see at Geneva. They were all there too at the big party in St. George's Hall in the Kremlin. Well, that's off the subject.

O'BRIEN: Very much on. Well, it's been suggested that TV came of age as a media, as a news media in those years, particularly the convention in '60 and on. How do you reflect it back over that and particularly in reporting of foreign affairs? Is it mature, let's say, in '61?

ABEL: Yes.

O'BRIEN: Is it a ma . . .

ABEL: I think there was a kind of maturing. I can only speak from the point of view of NBC. I joined NBC in the autumn of '61 as a fairly experienced newspaperman, hardly a novice (though I was a novice in terms of electronics and worrying about whether your nose was shining). It happened to be, I think, a kind of vintage period in television. The reason was a purely practical one: the man then in charge of NBC, the president of NBC, [Robert E.] Bob Kintner, had come over from ABC (American Broadcasting Company); he had taken over a company that was not in very good shape. In terms of ratings it was way, way-behind CBS. He made a calculated decision that he couldn't hope to match CBS's popular entertainment programs, but he wanted people to be aware of NBC's existence.

So he went into the business of pre-empting regularly scheduled programs very, very frequently whenever any kind of new situation seemed to demand extensive coverage, and put us on the air. You know, we had lots of freedom.